CHAPTER

23

Drugs, Suppositories, and Cult Worship in Antiquity

David Hillman

Independent Scholar, Specializes in Ancient Pharmacy and Medicine, Madison, WI, United States

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23.1 INTRODUCTION

The oldest Greco-Roman medicines were plant-derived chemicals and animal toxins used predominantly in gynecology and obstetrics. [Our earliest Greek medical sources include treatises on the proper regulation of menstruation, conception, and delivery. The Hippocratic *Nature of Women* (Περί(Γυναικείησ Φύσιος) contains lengthy instructions on the preparation and application of pessaries, douches, and other

Toxicology in Antiquity
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-815339-0.00023-8

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gynecological drugs. The names of gynecological drugs are among the most prominent within the corpus of Greco-Roman pharmacy. Some botanical components of these widely used drugs and drug concoctions derived their common names from the gynecological activity they promoted: e.g., the plant known as "aristolochia" means "best childbirth." The nexus of drugs, women, gynecology, and religion dates back to the foundation of Greco-Roman culture (see Riddle, 2010). Greek and Roman myth and cult rites actively promote the use of gynecological drugs in association with the worship of the earliest Mediterranean deities, including mother goddesses, witches, and oracles.] Female physicians, priestesses, and midwives belonged to the oldest pre-Hippocratic traditions of medicine and pharmacy in the Mediterranean and were largely responsible for the establishment of western medicine and pharmacy.

Scholars have closely examined drugs used as potables, edibles, and inhalations, but little is known of the vaginal and anal suppositories used in antiquity, their unique methods of administration, or their use in cultic sexual practices. Despite the under-researched nature of these drugs—due in large part to their direct association with practices and bodily functions considered taboo by modern cultures—a knowledge of their use helps to paint a more complete picture of the historical nexus of drugs and ancient cults as well as the gynecological sophistication of classical civilization.

23.2 DRUGS AND CULTS

Virgil's *Aeneid* preserves a mythic episode that aptly illustrates the predominant role of exotic botanicals and venoms in antiquity as well as their connection with traditional cults. Ancient mystery rites referenced in numerous Greek and Roman poets illustrate the use of potent drugs that affect human sexuality; many of these drugs were applied to the anus and vagina by means of medicated dildos and as pessaries.

Virgil's treatment of the goddess Allecto illustrates the use of drugs within the context of ancient cult ritual. Allecto, a Fury, was very much the quintessential sibyl. [The figure of Allecto as the virgo or κόρη is foreshadowed in the Etruscan maiden figure of Vanth, who is a combination of Hecate and the Furies. See *The Religion of the Etruscans*, ed. by Grummond and Simon (De Grummond and Simon, 2006). There is also an element of the Lasas in Allecto, who are known to carry the alabastron (ἀλάβαστρον), an overtly sexual device used to apply μύρον as seen in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. The alabastron was mentioned in the gospel of Mark as a perfume container possessed by Mary Magdalene, an alleged prostitute.] Like the goddess Justice, she was an eternally youthful dancer, possessed of the bloom of life, whose mind was immovably

set on the "purgation" of the unjust; as an avenging Fury, she sang of the beauty of pain—a psychic pain she imposed as punishment upon the impious.

Virgil described Allecto as one of the daughters of Black Night; she was a Fury who exercised a power to overthrow the sanity of mortals irredeemably possessed by greed, ill-will, and hubris. When heaven needed brother to fight brother, it summoned Allecto; in the seventh book of the *Aeneid*, Juno called upon the teenage goddess to drive a queen crazy in order to start an uncivil war between the inhabitants of Italy and the Trojans. (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 7.341–7: "Then Allecto, saturated with the poisons of the Gorgons ... takes up a position at the most private portal of queen Amata ... into whom the goddess forcefully inserts a single measure of snake venom taken from her black hair; she applies the suppository in her body's natural pocket, at the place of her most intimate being." Author's translation.)

Allecto spread her maddening poison by applying a snake-derived drug to a mortal woman's biological "pocket," or in Virgil's words, the location of her most intimate sensations. Like other Bacchants, the goddess removed the venom from her own hair, which was traditionally depicted in both art and literature as being full of vipers. (As seen in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Bacchae*. Interestingly, most of the deities associated with ritual Bacchic worship were young girls who had not yet had children, yet each was able—like the Nymphs—to provide breast milk to their charges. These nurses are directly associated with the viper of Dionysus, and it is known that viper venom produces a prolactin-like response in mammary tissue.) After this venom was absorbed vaginally, Virgil says it coursed through the queen's body, intoxicated her, and sent her into an ecstatic frenzy.

23.3 BACCHANTS AND VIPER VENOM

Before ancient seers summoned spirits like Allecto from the underworld—an arcane practice known as necromancy—they invoked Bacchus, the god of ecstatic dance. The worship of this mystery cult divinity, known variously as Dionysus, Bromius, and Zagreus, was connected in classical literature and art with the handling of the European horned viper (*Vipera ammodytes*). This snake accompanied Maenads and Bacchants in their religious processions and was frequently associated with young, virgin girls of myth who nursed gods and heroes alike.

In antiquity, snakes like the horned viper were closely bound up with the practice of medicine and the exercises of cults. The Greeks, Romans, and Etruscans did not openly distinguish between the practice of medicine and religion, and even the goddess of health herself—

Hygeia—was sometimes portrayed with a snake positioned over an offering dish in a posture that appears to imply the act of milking the animal's venom.

The use of viper venom in ancient medicine and cults may explain how young girls associated with the cult of Bacchus, who were not previously pregnant, were able to function as wet nurses. Crotoxin is a phospholipase A2 neurotoxin produced by a South American pit viper (*Crotalus durissus terrificus*). This crotalid toxin has similar biological activities to the components of horned viper venom and acts on mammary epithelial cells to stimulate the secretion of casein using the same biochemical pathways as prolactin (see Ollivier-Bousquet et al., 1991). Stimulating the production of breast milk by the application of viper venom may have been responsible for the ability of these nonparturient girls to lactate.

Divinities like the Furies—one of whom was Allecto—and their sisters, the Death-Spirits (Keres), were represented as being infused with viper venom; the ancient world believed these female entities were particularly hearty and possessed significant stamina, longevity, and an apparent immunity to weakness or illness. Some of them are even called "dragonesses," and are involved with the "burning off" of human mortality. It appears that the priestesses of Hecate, Priapus, and Demeter/Persephone were involved in the consumption of viper venom. [*Aeschylus was nearly executed for revealing the secrets of the Eleusinian mysteries in his plays on Orestes. One of these plays (The Cup-bearers) contains a dream of a "dragoness" in which her breast milk is injected with the venom of a snake.*] These priestesses were considered to be physically superior to ordinary mortals, and like the Furies were of a superior physical constitution—and somewhat immune to disease. Interestingly, crotoxin has shown itself to be a potential anticancer drug (see Cura et al., 2002).

23.4 ANCIENT VAGINAL SUPPOSITORIES

Allecto's application of a snake-venom-based drug to a woman's vagina is in direct step with ancient gynecological practices. According to the author of the Hippocratic treatise titled *The Nature of Women*, numerous compound drug mixtures in antiquity were used to produce abortion, control uterine bleeding, and treat disease. These drugs were applied directly to the vagina by means of cylindrical pessaries. [Hippocrates, *Nature of Women*, 71: "Irritating suppositories that draw blood: mix frankincense and myrrh with blister beetle, forming them as a big as an oak gall; make into an elongated shape, attach it around a feather with a flock of wool, tie it with a thread of fine linen, soak in white Egyptian unguent or rose unguent, and apply." Translated by Paul Potter.]

Frankincense, myrrh, and blister beetle were all common ingredients in gynecological drug mixtures. Aromatic botanicals were exceptionally common as basic components of Greco-Roman suppositories, unguents, and ointments.

Blister beetle was a very popular aphrodisiac in antiquity just as it has been in the modern world. Cantharidin, a terpenoid secreted by blister beetles, is an irritant or blistering agent that induces priapism. Cantharidin can cause gastrointestinal and renal dysfunction, but it has been used since classical antiquity as an effective aphrodisiac. [Cantharidin has also been used in China. For its history and toxicology see Moed et al. (2001).]

Rose oil, like other fragrant volatile oils, was most often used as a base for gynecological applications. The combination of a drug like cantharidin with aromatic oils may have been responsible for the abortifacient and/or contraceptive qualities of these aphrodisiacs. The caustic properties of cantharidin would have irritated the lining of the uterus to such a degree as to induce sloughing and therefore the prevention of implantation. Rose oil concoctions were typically associated with the priestly followers of Aphrodite, who were typically associated with temple prostitution.

According to the aforementioned passage from the Hippocratic *The Nature of Women*, vaginal suppositories were compounded and then worked into a penis-like shape for the sake of application. These drugs were used to affect reproductive physiology, sexual activity, and disease. Greek and Latin vocabulary concerned with suppository usage was highly specific. For example, both cultures employed specific verbs denoting the act of applying of suppositories to the vagina and anus. ["Προστίθημι" in Greek and "subdo" in Latin denote the application of a pessary or a suppository. The Greek gynecological texts found in the Hippocratic corpus—which could not have been written by Hippocratic physicians due to their liberal use of abortifacients—are full of the nominal forms of this verb and associated nouns that indicate or denote a "pessary" or "suppository."]

23.5 DRUGS AND SEXUALITY

Dioscorides, a first century CE physician and compiler of botanical and animal-derived drugs, wrote at length about the use of oils, ointments, and unguents in sexual contexts. These drugs were typically divided into compounds that "harden" and "soften" the external genitalia—also known as "heating" and "cooling" drugs. The Greco-Roman world used these substances to prepare the genitalia for copulation, to prevent disease and to regulate menstruation; these drugs, despite their numerous varied uses, were known collectively as "aphrodisiacs."

Opobalsamum, known to biblical scholars as the "balm of Gilead," was one such valuable aphrodisiac. According to Dioscorides, opobalsamum was the hard-to-collect exudate of a Middle Eastern tree—a substance produced in response to structural injury. [Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 1.19 (Dioscorides, 1958).] Like the "tears" of myrrh, frankincense, and even the opium poppy, this drug was a potent secondary metabolite that was harvested, packaged, and sold in markets throughout the Mediterranean. (Many of the exudates harvested from injury are referred to as "tears" due to their appearance and the fact that they drip slowly from incisions made in the botanicals whence they are derived.) Dioscorides reveals that expensive drugs like opobalsamum were so valuable that they were frequently adulterated by drug sellers. [According to Dioscorides, opobalsamum was so valuable that it was worth twice its weight in silver. 1.19. Because of this, he speaks extensively about the best means of testing the drug in order to determine its purity (Dioscorides, 1958).]

Opobalsamum—among other things—was a diuretic, an abortifacient, and used to treat abrasions of the vulva [Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 1.19 (Dioscorides, 1958)]. Like other secondary metabolites, opobalsamum possessed distinct antifungal and bacteriostatic properties that may have been responsible for its use as a means of decreasing the prevalence of certain sexually transmitted diseases. It is also significant that an ointment compounded of opobalsamum was also believed to counteract snake venom—something to which ancient priestesses, like those who worshiped Bacchus, Hecate, and Allecto, would have been exposed.

23.6 APHRODISIAC SUPPOSITORIES AND MAGIC

Priestesses who served divinities like the infernal Furies, or their leader, the witch goddess Hecate, were known in antiquity to exercise powers over demons; such manipulation of the natural world was considered to be the practice of magic. Just as ancient magic was not distinguished from the practice of religion, the use of drugs and the act of sex were not considered to be strictly secular or nonreligious operations; sex, drugs, and religion were a single entity in the ancient world.

According to Petronius, the first century CE author of the *Satyricon*, Roman priestesses were known for their drug-induced sexual practices. In one particular episode of his novel, Petronius allows one of his characters to illustrate the power of the priestess-sorceress to control and manipulate human sexuality by means of drugs:

"Oenoethea, drawing out a leathern prick, dipped it in a medley of oil, small pepper, and the bruised seed of nettles, and proceeded by

degrees to direct its passage through my hinder parts.... with this mixture the old woman laboriously sprinkled my thighs; ...and with the juice of cresses and southern-wood washing my loins, she took a bunch of green nettles and began to strike gently all the vale below my navel." (Petronius, Satyricon, 138. Translated by W.H.D. Rouse; Warmington, 1987)

In actuality, the sorceress Oenoethea was acting as a priestess-physician in this passage; she was attempting to cure Petronius' character of his impotency. What is most curious about the passage is that Petronius does not seem to question the reality that men were readily penetrated anally in medico-religious acts in antiquity. In other words, it was acceptable for men to have drugs applied anally by means of medicated dildos.

The use of nettles both externally and internally as a promoter of penile erection may be the result of the presence of 3,4-divanillyltetrahydrofuran, a lignan that appears to liberate available testosterone and thus may influence sexual drive. [For a closer look at lignans, see Touré and Xueming (2010).]

Medico-religious ceremonies also employed the use of drugs with the intent of producing magical "fluids." Bodily secretions like semen, vaginal ejaculate, saliva, and even breast milk were all important ingredients of magical ceremonies—including healing acts, exorcisms, and "purgations." [The roots of these practices are found in Egypt. See *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* by Ritner (1993).] In another episode found in the *Satyricon*, Petronius causes his characters to employ magic in order to induce erection and ejaculation:

Then the old woman took a twist of threads of different colors out of her dress, and tied it around my neck. Then she mixed some dust with spittle, and took it on her middle finger, and made a mark on my forehead despite my protest.... after this chant she ordered me to spit three times and throw stones into my bosom three times, after she had said a spell over them and wrapped them in purple and laid her hands on me and proceeded to try the force of their charm on the powers of my groin. Before you could say a word, my sinews obeyed her comment and filled the old woman's hands with a huge upstir (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 131. Translated by W.H.D. Rouse; Warmington, 1987).

Like the Fury Allecto, the sorceress in this passage employs magical elements including drugs, incantations, the manipulation of the sexual organs, and the use of body fluids to affect a change in her subject. And once again, the manipulation of sexuality by means of drugs and ritual magic is forced. In other words, Virgil's Allecto inspires madness by means of violently forceful sexual drug-magic, just as Petronius' sorceresses aggressively apply medicines in order to manipulate sexual experience in a religious setting.

23.7 CONCLUSION

The ultimate purpose of using drugs and magical ritual to affect human sexual experience was the veneration of deities. Greek and Roman sorceresses worked with one goal in mind; they desired to celebrate the gods by using magic to create oracular vision. Vaginal suppositories that maddened women, anally inserted medicated dildos that mesmerized men, and drugs used to force the expulsion of ejaculate were all elements of the creation of religious song.

Religious ecstasy was enhanced by drugs and the rituals of young priestesses, but the climactic moment of ancient medico-religious experience was always accompanied by a divine utterance or shout. This shout became the holy voice of the deity overseeing the performance of such mysteries; the god was directly served by means of this ecstatic vocalization. In other words, when Allecto forcefully drugged her victims by penetrating their most private body parts, and thus infused them with fury, their pained screams of lunatic agony served Justice.

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